

U.S. Rep. Tom Udall (NM-3)
Statement on the passage of
The Valle Vidal Protection Act
July 24, 2006

Mr./Madam Speaker:

The Valle Vidal, located in the heart of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in my district in northern New Mexico, is a lush 100,000-acre mountain basin in the Carson National Forest. In 1982, the Pennzoil Company donated the unspoiled Valle Vidal to the people of the United States. It was the largest and most valuable gift of private land ever to the Forest Service.

This “valley of life”, as Valle Vidal translates in English, is home to abundant populations of Rocky Mountain wildlife, including the largest herd of elk in our state and some of the finest trout streams in the Nation. Sportsmen, outdoor recreationists, cattle ranchers, wildlife enthusiasts, and horseback riders all enjoy the Valle Vidal's well-managed and accessible blend of wildland resources. The Valle Vidal is also a unique place for the Boy Scouts of America who have for decades come from all over the country to the adjacent Philmont Scout Ranch, the national high adventure base of the Boy Scouts of America. That is why the Philmont Staff Association, a non-profit organization of more than 2,200 current and former members of the staff the ranch, has publicly stated that the Valle Vidal should be maintained as a wilderness experience, free from the impact of coal bed methane development.

During my time in Congress, I have closely followed numerous events concerning both the Valle Vidal and our Nation's energy situation. I have traveled to the Valle Vidal to witness its beauty and take part in various activities. I have introduced energy policy initiatives and reviewed regulatory action undertaken by the executive branch. I have also received thousands of calls, emails, faxes and letters against drilling and, I think I can safely say, none in support of it. As a result, I have come to the inescapable conclusion that the Valle Vidal should be protected from energy development. It is clear to me that the value of the Valle Vidal lies only in its broad public accessibility and natural beauty and not in its finite supply of energy.

New Mexicans and thousands of Americans are overwhelmingly against drilling in the refuge. These concerned citizens recognize that the Valle Vidal's minimal contribution to our energy needs is not worth despoiling such an important ecological resource. The consequences are just too great. Moreover, many of my constituents, as confirmed by recent economic studies, recognize that the protection of special public lands like the Valle Vidal is good for local economies and that exploitation of these places for a few hours of energy will, in fact, hurt long-term economic growth and sustainability. Fundamentally, drilling in the Valle Vidal to create more energy is a false choice.

The very fact that this special place is being targeted for oil and gas leasing radically demonstrates the current and growing crisis with America's energy situation. We must urgently find ways to balance the needs of supplying safe, reliable energy and of ensuring a livable and sustainable environment for the people of the United States.

To that end, I urge all of my colleagues in the House to support passage of The Valle Vidal Protection Act of 2005 to permanently protect the Valle Vidal from mineral extraction. The Valle Vidal's ecological health and public accessibility should be protected so it can be enjoyed to the utmost by current and future generations. This ecosystem and its myriad of recreational opportunities are too valuable to the people of New Mexico and the nation, and the energy gains too miniscule, to justify any damage to this special area.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Chairman Pombo and to Ranking Member Rahall and especially to my colleague on the Forest Subcommittee, Chairman Greg Walden for their work on the Valle Vidal Protection Act of 2005. I would also like to thank fellow New Mexicans Jim O'Donnell of the Coalition for the Valle Vidal, and Mayor Danny Cruz of Springer, rancher Alan Lackey, and Bill Schudlich ["Shud-lick"] of Trout Unlimited who all traveled to D.C. to testify on behalf of the Valle Vidal, and Oscar Simpson, Ed Olona, and Steve Capra who have worked diligently to build broad, meaningful grassroots support for this legislation. I would finally like to thank some of the staff who make everything we do here possible, including Johanna Polsenberg and Thomas Garcia on my staff, and Rick Healy and Jim Zoia on the staff of the Resources Committee.

Thank you.